

MISERCORDIAS DOMINI (EASTER 3)

1 PETER 2:20-25

He Himself Bore Our Sins

If He is the model Shepherd and Overseer, what am I? Yup: the imperfect shepherd and overseer, and I don't think they make t-shirts or give medals for that. If Christ is the standard, where do you fall? I'll give you a hint: the apple may not fall far from the tree, but you're no apple. We are imperfect knock-offs of the crucified and risen standard, and not imperfect like the clothes in the outlet stores in Birch Run, but imperfect like the stuff in the garbage heap behind the factory. When we look at St. Peter's description of Jesus, all we can do is marvel and wonder: He lived in our world? He lived among the people we live among? He dealt with the stuff we deal with? Is that possible? The angel's words to the Blessed Virgin come to mind: *"For nothing is impossible with God."*

"He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth." If the doors of our closets were swung open, if a recorder captured our every word, how many of us wouldn't come close to turning this verse completely on its head: *"There was no sin he did not commit, neither was there any deceit that was not found in his mouth."* And I am not talking about what we'd admit, but what we've done, what God has seen, even when we've closed the door, turned off the lights, and done our best to whisper.

"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." But how often wouldn't we rather take an eye than turn a cheek. How often don't we adapt, *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,"* into, *"Do unto me and maybe then I'll do unto you"*? *"Vengeance belongs to the Lord,"* but how often haven't we pickpocketed God to pronounce our own sentence on another, as if Christ's unfathomably strong response in Holy Week was weak and beneath a real man.

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree..." This was a costly decision. Our punishment bled Him like a leech, tattooed, tattered, and tore His flesh with the teeth of thorns and whips. We might wonder what was wrong with Him that He'd do so much for those who don't appreciate it, who take advantage of it, but we should wonder what is wrong with us that it goes so frequently forgotten. We claim to be Christians, so why are we so unlike our Christ? Why is every husband so unlike the heavenly Bridegroom? Why is every shepherd and overseer so unlike the chief Shepherd and Overseer of our souls? And there's the rub.

So thanks, St. Peter! Heap the shame on our head. Plop us knee deep in a mess of our own making. But you could at least lend us a hand out. Are we supposed to just wallow here like pigs, to try to escape only to fall back in, like a dog returning to its own vomit?

But St. Peter doesn't leave us here. He stands with us as a fellow sinner and points to the one true and lasting Hope for the muddy but humbled. You heard it before, but you heard it as law, as what you had not done. Now hear it as what He has done, and not only what He has done, but what He has done for you. *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."*

Like a college kid with a credit card, or a gambler with a casino chip, you've run up a mountain of debt that you can't climb. But Christ has bailed you out, not to do it again, but to give you a fresh start, like Mom or Dad in their mercy flitting the bill with the assumption that the lesson is learned. *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness."* He is not the excuse for our sins; He is our Savior from them. He is not our license for sinning; He is our death to sinning. This Shepherd restores our souls and leads us, not back into the bog, but in the paths of righteousness.

The English have a proverb: "The noblest vengeance is to forgive." Don't you just want to punch the English? But Christ put the proverb into practice. We can find many of Christ's teachings in the works of the noble Pagans, of Mohammed, of Buddha, of Confucius, but not this one: the free and unearned forgiveness of sins. That is found only in Jesus Christ, the only God who loves His sheep enough to be tossed to the wolves for their sake.

The Good Shepherd, having given His life to give you eternal life, He has also left you an example to follow in this life, footsteps in which to step in your daily life, to keep from getting lost. Like a child in the winter, trying to walk in his father's boot prints, the strides may at times seem long, but He's there to help you make them.

The word here for "example" comes from the Greek word used for handwriting class. Remember those. I know I do. Sister Karen hovered over your shoulder, yardstick in hand, not to hit you, but to remind you to measure up, as your hand cramped and the pencil became a sixth finger. But I learned. I learned well enough that the next year I was the only boy to test out of handwriting class. Some may think that a blessing. They've never been the only boy to test out of sixth-grade cursive. I still cringe in emasculated shame whenever some well-meaning woman tells me I have pretty handwriting. You might as well just put me in a dress.

Handwriting class with Christ, however, is not like class with Sister Karen. It's like your early years when you loved to learn new letters and drew them for fun, quick to call Mom and Dad to look at what you'd learned and done. Messing up wasn't a reason to quit; it was simply a reason to grab a new sheet. And learning this language of Love doesn't merely put a smile on our Father's face. It benefits our

neighbor. It even benefits us ourselves. After all, the commandments aren't given to protect God. He's God either way. The commandments are given to protect us.

There's a long list of reasons to call me a nerd—I am sure there is a list floating out there somewhere—and one of them is that I am a big fan of Russian fiction. My favorite Russian novelist is Fyodr Dostoevsky—Fyodr is another name, by the way, to the add to the list of names Tricia's vetoed for any of our children. In researching his life one day—you guessed it: for fun—I came upon this story:

After a bad night, the Russian writer Dostoevsky said to his wife, "I must die today. Light a candle, Anya, and give me the gospel." She handed him a battered New Testament. It had been the only book permitted him during the first three of his four years in a Siberian prison three decades before. The dying man called his little son, Fyodor, and his daughter, Lyubov, to his side and asked that the parable of the prodigal son be read to them. Anna read the passage from Luke 15, and then Dostoevsky said to them: "Children, never forget what you have just heard here. Preserve an unbounded faith in the Lord and never despair of his forgiveness. I love you dearly, but my love is nothing in comparison to the Lord's infinite love for all men whom he has created. If ever it should happen that in the course of your life you commit an offence, you must not lose hope in the Lord. You are his children. Humble yourselves before him, as your Father; beg him for forgiveness, and he will rejoice at your repentance, as he rejoiced at the return of the prodigal son."

What better advice could a father give his child? Plead the Father's mercy through the Son, for, prodigal though you may have been, you have returned to the Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to search out even one lost sheep, to the Overseer who never loses sight of any of those placed into His care. No, you cannot perfectly live like Him, but you can live in Him who perfectly lived for you, doing your best to copy the cursive of Him whose love for you is written down for all eternity. Rejoice that He is what you are not, and strive to be what He is. He is selfless, loving, and forgiving, and what would you rather He be? You may be a knock-off of the original, but a good knock-off knows it can never be the original, but nonetheless tries its best to maintain a resemblance. And by God's grace, that is what we've been set free to do. Amen.